

9/11 as Avantgarde Art?

Richard Schechner

In a word, hermeneutic terrorism becomes a powerful weapon, by leaving the gaps or blanks in its message available for ad-libbing. One can almost talk of an interactive terrorism, of a karaoke of sorts. I am amazed to see that so many artists or intellectuals have been ready and willing to sing in tune with the September 11 terrorists, and that the improvised statements of Gunther Grass, Arundhati Roy, Karl-Heinz Stockhausen, Jean Marie Straub, Daniele Huillet could hardly be distinguished from those of Bin Laden himself [...].

--Daniel Dayan¹

An American general in Baghdad called Iraq a "work of art" in progress yesterday [3 November 2006] in one of the most extraordinary attempts by the US military leadership to put a positive spin on the worsening violence. On a day in

¹ "Media, the intifada and the aftermath of September 11," *European Judaism*, Spring 2002 v35 i1 p70ff.

which 49 people were killed or found dead around the country, Major General William Caldwell, the chief military spokesman, argued that Iraq was in transition, a process that was "not always a pleasant thing to watch. Every great work of art goes through messy phases while it is in transition. A lump of clay can become a sculpture. Blobs of paint become paintings which inspire," Maj. Gen Caldwell told journalists in Baghdad's fortified green zone.

--Julian Borger²

[The attacks of 9/11 were] the greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos. Minds achieving something in an act that we couldn't even dream of in music, people rehearsing like mad for 10 years, preparing fanatically for a concert, and then dying, just imagine what happened there. You have people who are that focused on a performance and then 5,000 [sic] people are dispatched to the afterlife, in a single moment. I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing. Artists, too, sometimes try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable, so that we wake up, so that we open ourselves to another world. [...] It's a crime because those

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2006/nov/03/usa.iraq>

involved didn't consent. They didn't come to the 'concert.'
That's obvious. And no one announced that they risked
losing their lives. What happened in spiritual terms, the
leap out of security, out of what is usually taken for
granted, out of life, that sometimes happens to a small
extent in art, too, otherwise art is nothing.

--Karlheinz Stockhausen³

Nearly everyone in the world knows and has some deeply
held, personal response to what happened in New York City
and Washington, D. C., on September 11, 2001. The
extraordinary sight of wide-bodied Boeing airplanes
speeding like bullets down Manhattan Island at near the
speed of sound, a mere 500-800 feet above the busy streets,
then smashing into the city's tallest buildings, eventually
reducing them to rubble—these sublime acts of terror
stunned the world. In a sense, we witnessed two types of
the sublime as defined by Kant, the terrifying and the
splendid. The terrifying arises from the great power and
speed of these projectiles carrying helpless, unknowing
passengers, and the dreadful toll in lost lives; the
splendid results from the magnificence of the airplanes and

³ http://www.osborne-conant.org/documentation_stockhausen.htm

the remarkable, gargantuan architecture of the twin towers.

--Vernon Hyde Minor⁴

In the USA, dialing 911, pronounced "nine one one" is the way to call for help in an emergency. 9/11, pronounced "nine eleven," is the universal signifier of the September 11, 2001 (terrorist) attack on New York's World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. "911" has been the emergency number to dial in the USA since 1968,⁵ so can it be an accident that whoever coined the phrase "9/11" didn't know of its prior use? Or that the date the terrorists selected was accidental? In their own view, were the attackers making an emergency call? Or forcing Americans into a horrible crisis? On October 7, 2001, less than a month after the attacks of 9/11, Osama Bin Laden made the following statement:

God Almighty hit the United States at its most vulnerable spot. He destroyed its greatest buildings. Praise be to

⁴ "What Kind of Tears? 9/11 and the Sublime," *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 14 (2001): 91-96

⁵ According to <http://people.howstuffworks.com/question664.htm>, "In 1967, the Federal Communications Commission met with ATT&T to establish [...] an emergency number [...] that was short and easy to remember. More importantly, they needed a unique number, and since 911 had never been designated for an office code, area code or service code, that was the number they chose. Soon after, the U.S. Congress [...] passed legislation making 911 the exclusive number for any emergency calling service."

God. Here is the United States. It was filled with terror from its north to its south and from its east to its west. Praise be to God.⁶

How was all of the USA, east west north south, to be “filled with terror” if not by the swift and saturating dissemination of the news and images of the attack? And what was the USA’s “most vulnerable spot” if not the imaginations of its people? And who, in Bin Laden’s view, was the attacker? Not Al-Qaeda, but “God Almighty.” As with the plagues against Egypt in Moses’s day, God Himself is the doer of the horror.

9/11 was a successful assault on the imagination. Americans – and the rest of the world – saw what they never thought they would see. The USA was “wounded” by terrorists, non-state actors. And what kind of wound was it? Ian Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts write:

Spectacularly, the American state suffered a defeat on September 11. And *spectacularly*, for this state, does not mean superficially or epiphenomenally. The state was wounded in September in its heart of hearts [...]. [T]he

⁶ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/158536.stm

horrors of September 11 were designed above all to be visible [...]. September's terror was different [than the fire bombing of Dresden or the atom bombing of Hiroshima]. [...] It was premised on the belief (learned from the culture it wishes to annihilate) that a picture is worth a thousand words - that a picture, in the present condition of politics, is itself, if sufficiently well executed, a specific and effective piece of statecraft.⁷

Not statecraft as we know it. Neither a treaty nor a declaration of war in the ordinary sense, 9/11 exploded Americans' sense of well-being and security. No one who saw 9/11 - and a large percentage of the world's population did see it, again and again - will forget it. From that day forward, New York's downtown skyline was marked by an absence: "There's where they were," is the common explanation accompanying a pointing finger. Absence

⁷ 25-26 in *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (2005) by Ian Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts. London and New York: Verso.

is the motif of the Memorial which "will consist of two massive pools set within the footprints of the Twin Towers."⁸

And the American response? It is unlikely but possible that President George W. Bush's speech writers knew Immanuel Kant's assertion that the "sublime is the name given to what is absolutely great, [...] what is beyond all comparison great," what is "terrifying and splendid,"⁹ when they put "shock and awe" into the President's mouth to describe the American March 2003 air assault on Bagdad kicking-off the second Iraq War. Bush wanted to make sure that the USA answered spectacle with spectacle. Without doubt, the speechwriters knew of Harlan K.

⁸ According to the National September 11 Memorial & Museum website: The pools will have " ...the largest manmade waterfalls in the country cascading down their sides. [...] As the Memorial Competition Jury explained its decision, 'In its powerful, yet simple articulation of the footprints of the Twin Towers, "Reflecting Absence" has made the voids left by the destruction the primary symbols of our loss'" http://www.national911memorial.org/site/PageServer?pagename=building_home.

⁹ See Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and especially therein his "Analytic of the Sublime." Also see Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). Burke writes: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature [...] is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other."

Ullman and James P. Wade's 1996 book, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*¹⁰, published by the National Defense University. Absolutely true is that Bang on a Can, a music group "with an ear for the new, the unknown and the unconventional"¹¹ knew Stockhausen's "greatest work of art imaginable" when they put his *Stimmung* "as the culminating piece of a 12-hour marathon ending early on the morning of June 1, 2008 at the World Financial Center Winter Garden."¹²

Furthermore, as a military operation, as an act of (unconventional) war, the 9/11 attacks proved very successful in the long run. Boal et al go on:

¹⁰ Published by the National Defense University. According to NDU's website, http://www.ndu.edu/info/about_ndu.cfm, "The National Defense University is the premier center for Joint Professional Military Education (JPME) and is under the direction of the Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff. [...] The National Defense University is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools."

¹¹ From Bang on a Can's mission statement. See http://www.bangonacan.org/about_us. The World Financial Center is located in lower Manhattan just to the west of the World Trade Center memorial site.

¹² See http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/03/nyregion/03composer.html?_r=1&ref=nyregion&oref=slogin

Of course the martyr-pilots knew that bringing down the Twin Towers would do nothing, or next to nothing, to stop the actual circuits of capital. But circuits of capital are bound up, in the longer term, with circuits of sociability - patterns of belief and desire, levels of confidence, degrees of identification with the good life of the commodity. And these, said the terrorists, thinking strategically, are aspects of the social imaginary still (always, interminably) being put together by the perpetual emotion machines. Supposing those machines could be captured for a moment, and on them appeared the perfect image of capitalism's negation. Would that not be enough? Enough truly to destabilize the state and society, and produce a sequence of vauntings and paranoias whose long-term political consequences for the capitalist world order would, at the very least, be unpredictable" (26).

These observations published in 2005 proved very prophetic. Follow this causal chain: 9/11 evokes a panicked, paranoic, and massive reaction that is harnessed to neo-con desires both to control Iraq's oil and to "democratize" Iraq as a model for the Arab Middle East. These twin objectives could most efficiently (it was thought) be realized by an easy war symbolized by

President Bush's May 2003 "Mission Accomplished" landing on the aircraft carrier USS Lincoln. Such bravado went hand-in-hand with contradictory instructions given to the American people. In order to show that "they can't scare us" Americans were asked to support the "War on Terror" while continuing to live normally with no sacrifices such as a draft, rationing, or higher taxes. In fact, taxes were cut - especially for the wealthiest Americans. The government double-speak advised: We are at war but you live as if at peace. Even as opposition to the war grew, the government and the people kept spending as if there were no tomorrow. The spending was a way of repressing what was happening. Soon the USA - individually, corporately, and governmentally - spent itself into unmanageable debt. And when the collapse came during the 2008 presidential campaign, the Iraq war took a back seat to the economy. But actually the wrecked economy was the outcome of the contradictions inherent in the way the War on Terror was fought - a war ostensibly waged in response to the 9/11 attacks. Thus the terrorists accomplished their long-term objective of bringing down The USA and its allied globalized economic system. "World Trade Center" means more than two buildings - it is a system of world trade with the USA at its center. Destroying the towers unfolded

consequences far out-reaching the spectacular initial explosions and collapses¹³.

To return to the question of art: Stockhausen aside, how can anyone persist in calling the 9/11 attack on the Trade Towers a work of art? Of what value is such a designation? What does calling the destruction of the Trade Towers a work of art assert about (performance) art, the authenticity of "what really happened," and social morality during and after the first decade of the 21st century? To even begin to address these questions, I need refer to the history of the avantgarde - because it has been avantgarde artists who for more than a century have called

¹³ On October 21, 2001 Osama bin Laden spoke of the economic consequences: "And if the fall of the twin towers was a huge event, then consider the events that followed it - let us talk about the economic effects which are still continuing. According to their own admission the share of the losses on the Wall Street Market reached 16 percent. [...] A collapse of this scale has never happened before [...] it reaches \$640 billion of losses from stocks. [...] The daily income of the American nation is \$20 billion. The first week they didn't work at all as a result of the psychological shock of the attack, and even today some still don't work because of it. So if you multiply \$20 billion by 1 week, it comes to \$140 billion - and the actual amount is even bigger than this. If you add it to the \$640 billion, we've reached how much? [...] American studies and analysis have mentioned that 70 per cent of the American people are still suffering from depression and psychological trauma. [...]. These repercussions cannot be calculated by anyone, due to their very large - and increasing - scale, multitude, and complexity, so watch as the amount reaches no less than \$1 trillion [...]. " From *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, 2005: 111-12. London: Verso.

for the violent destruction of existing aesthetic, social, and political systems. Of French origin, "avantgarde" – cognate to "vanguard" and "van" – has been used in English since the end of the 15th century. The OED states that the avantgarde is "the foremost part of an army" but also refers to being "ahead" or "first" in any number of circumstances). At the start of the 19th century the term was taken up by social activists, utopians, and artists to signify those ahead of the rest of society¹⁴. The word kept its militancy, especially among artists. Here are a few exemplary quotations, roughly decade by decade, from a large repertory:

1909, from F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto: "We want to exalt movements of aggression, feverish sleeplessness, the double march, the perilous leap, the slap and the blow with the fist. [...] Beauty exists only in struggle. There is no masterpiece that has not an aggressive character.

Poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown, to force them to bow before man. [...] We want to

¹⁴ According to Thierry du Duve (1996:430-31), Olinde Rodrigues, a follower of Henri de Saint-Simon, wrote in 1825: "It is we, artists, that will serve as your avant-garde; the power of the arts is indeed the most immediate and the fastest. [...] We address ourselves to the imagination and feelings of people: we are therefore supposed to achieve the most vivid and decisive kind of action" (in *L'artiste, le savant et l'industrial*).

demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.[...] Let the good incendiaries with charred fingers come! Here they are! Heap up the fire to the shelves of the libraries! Divert the canals to flood the cellars of the museums! Let the glorious canvases swim ashore! Take the picks and hammers! Undermine the foundation of venerable towns! [...]For art can only be violence, cruelty, injustice."

1918, from Tristan Tzara's DADA Manifesto: "I assure you: there is no beginning, and we are not afraid; we aren't sentimental. We are like a raging wind that rips up the clothes of clouds and prayers, we are preparing the great spectacle of disaster, conflagration and decomposition. Preparing to put an end to mourning, and to replace tears by sirens spreading from one continent to another. [...] I destroy the drawers of the brain, and those of social organisation: to sow demoralisation everywhere, and throw heaven's hand into hell, hell's eyes into heaven, to reinstate the fertile wheel of a universal circus in the Powers of reality, and the fantasy of every individual."

1938, from Leon Trotsky and Andre Breton's Manifesto:

Toward a Free Revolutionary Art: "True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather

insists on expressing the inner needs of man and mankind in its time--true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society. [...] We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution."

1948, from the Quebecois Artists Global Refusal: "The religion of Christ has dominated the world. See what it has turned into: sister faiths have now begun to exploit each other. [...] Christian civilization is coming to an end. [...] The decline of Christianity will bring down with it all the people and all the classes that it has influenced, from the first to the last, from the highest to the lowest. [...] The rats are already fleeing a sinking Europe by crossing the Atlantic. However, events will eventually overtake the greedy, the gluttonous, the sybarites, the unperturbed, the blind and the deaf. They will be mercilessly swallowed up. [...] We must abandon the ways of society once and for all and free ourselves from its utilitarian spirit. We must not willingly neglect our spiritual side. [...] We accept full responsibility for the consequences of our total refusal."

1960, from the Situationists Manifesto: "The existing framework cannot subdue the new human force that is increasing day by day alongside the irresistible development of technology and the dissatisfaction of its possible uses in our senseless social life.[...]

Alienation and oppression in this society cannot be distributed amongst a range of variants, but only rejected *en bloc* with this very society. All real progress has clearly been suspended until the revolutionary solution of the present multiform crisis. [...]

9/11 did not stop artists from proclaiming radical manifestos:

2006, from the Art Guerrilla Manifesto: "Art Guerrilla is an art project which is open to all the artists around the world who are ready for a guerrilla war in a multi-dimensional manner. This war has got a unique aim: *recreate the soul of arts*. We know that this aim is indefinite; however, if we live in an indefinite age, if our enemies use indefinite weapons against us, it is also our right to move in an indefinite and uncertain sea.

[...] Are you a cynical member of the academy? Do people criticize your works in a weird way? Do you live in the periphery of the world (Asia, Balkans, Middle East, Africa, South America); or do you live in the peripheries

Almost as they were occurring the 9/11 attacks were marketed as popular entertainment. Representations of the attacks are paradigmatic of the accelerating conflation of "news" and "entertainment," and not only in the USA. In Yueqing, a newly industrialized city southwest of Shanghai, videos showing the attacks were for sale by September 14. In larger cities, these videos probably were on the market even sooner. As Peter Hessler reported from China:

They stocked them on the same racks as the Hollywood movies. Often the 9/11 videos were located in the cheaper sections, alongside dozens of American films. [...] All of the 9/11 videos had been packaged to look like Hollywood movies. I found a DVD entitled "The Century's Greatest Catastrophe"; the box front featured photographs of Osama bin Laden, George W Bush, and the burning Twin Towers. On the back, a small icon noted that it had been rated R, for violence and language.¹⁵

In the USA, news programs are sponsored. That is, the news is given in small temporal units and after two or three items, there is another temporal unit, a commercial break. This format

¹⁵ Peter Hessler, *Oracle Bones*. New York: Harper Collins, 2007: 311-12.

of program content and advertising running sequentially is the same for news, sports, drama, and various "contestant" shows (quiz shows, *American Idol*, etc.) including reality TV. The exponential increase in "reality TV" - the presentation of apparently actual "ordinary" people in the midst of either their ordinary lives or, more frequently, in some real or cooked-up crisis situation, further erases the boundary between the real (including news) and the made-for-entertainment. (Internet sites such as YouTube and its many internet cognates further blurs the boundaries between the real and the fictional.)

The TV presentations of the 9/11 attacks soon took on the qualities of a made-for-TV drama series. Each of the networks found a melodramatic title for their coverage of the attacks and the consequent events. Within hours after the planes struck the Twin Towers, the networks gave dramatic titles to their coverage: CBS, "Attack on America"; ABC: "America Under Attack"; CNN: "America's New War." A drumbeat began that led up to an into the bombing and invasion of Iraq in 2003. There was also much pathos. On September 14, NBC aired "America Mourns," heart-breaking stories mixed with calls for dedicated patriotism. On the first anniversary of the attack, the networks aired such programs as "The Day That Changed America" (CBS), "Report from Ground Zero" (ABC), and "9/11, The Day America Changed" (Fox).

The 9/11 attack segued into the American-led war against Iraq, with its own titles on TV. It all went under the overall official rubric of The War on Terror.

The program titles, the style of presenting the news, the sequencing of advertising and news items, showed how television, more than the other media, marketed 9/11 and the (second) Iraq War as a made-for-television series. This series included many subplots. Reporters were "embedded" with the troops on the ground. There were daily suicide bombings and attacks of what the government and media called "insurgents." Civilians were slaughtered in these bombings and also by the Allied military. Individual stories of death and wounds, pain and pathos, were aired side-by-side with reports of the growing opposition to the war as well as ritualized official reports of "we're winning." The high point (or maybe the low point) of this competition for attention in the entertainment version of reality was President Bush's May 1, 2003 arrival by jet fighter onto the deck of the aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln where a giant banner proclaimed "Mission Accomplished." Here melodrama gave way to farce. Bush was gussied up in a flight suit though he was a passenger not the pilot. Who descended to the carrier's flight deck? Bush or a Tom Cruise impersonator? Bush's show is not the only one of its kind. These conflations of news, staged

media events, and actuality does not make the 9/11 attack and the Iraq War "art," but they come very close to the melodramatic form of the serial. For performance theorists and historians, the collapse of aesthetic categories was already familiar from Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol. The ordinary urinal dubbed *Fountain*, the famous movie star (Marilyn Monroe), the common supermarket item (Campbell soup cans), and high art are not easily if at all distinguishable. At the far ends of the spectrum - urinal, movie star, and supermarket item at one end and the masterpieces that hang in the august galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at the other - distinctions are still clear. But today most of the art world and the real world live in between these extremes. The reporting-fictionalizing of 9/11, including the broadcasting and rebroadcasting of iconic images of the explosions, fires, destruction, aftermath, and war constitute an absorption of events not only into the popular imagination but also as objets des arts.¹⁶

On 9/11 there were four planes heading for their targets. Two torpedoed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, one damaged the Pentagon, and the fourth plane - probably headed for

¹⁶ For more on the relationship between terrorism and television, see *La Terreur Spectacle*, Daniel Dayan, ed. Paris: DeBoeck University, 2006.

the White House or Capitol - had its mission foiled by the resistance of the passengers and crashed in the woods of Pennsylvania. Given four planes and three targets, why almost immediately did "9/11" mean the destruction of the World Trade Center towers? New York is a real place, but it is also Batman's Gotham and Superman's Metropolis. It is, to many Americans, simply, "The City," quintessentially American and foreign simultaneously. Weirdly, I wonder if the jihadists knew Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York":

Start spreading the news, I'm leaving today

I want to be a part of it - New York, New York [...]

If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere

And why did the first attack occur at 8:45 a.m. eastern time and the second at 9:03? If the planes had crashed into the Towers 3 hours later, many more people would have died. If the two planes hit simultaneously or nearly so, the media would not see an actual collision, but only the aftermath. I believe the jihadists timed their hijackings as a one-two punch for maximum spectacular effect synchronized to the morning news cycle in New York and midday in Europe. Their intention was not to kill as many people as possible but to reach as large a spectatorship

in the West as possible. The World Trade Center was the epicenter not only of the attacks but of the imaginary that is "9/11." And what kind of imaginary is that?

When on September 16 Karlheinz Stockhausen called the destruction of the World Trade Towers: "The greatest work of art imaginable for the whole cosmos" his remark was greeted by rage and disgust. Also commenting on 9/11 was the 1997 Nobel Laureate for Literature, Dario Fo, who circulated an email stating: "The great speculators wallow in an economy that every year kills tens of millions of people with poverty -- so what is 20,000 [sic] dead in New York? Regardless of who carried out the massacre, this violence is the legitimate daughter of the culture of violence, hunger and inhumane exploitation."

Stockhausen's remarks were met with outrage, while Fo's hardly caused a ripple. Why? Because Fo left art out. His remarks were boilerplate leftist rhetoric - chickens coming home to roost. People were upset at Stockhausen because he claimed for art an importance equal to that of politics. Stockhausen saw 9/11 as "lifelike art," art as action, not representation. Theorized by Allan Kaprow, "Artlike art holds that art is separate from life and everything else, while lifelike art holds that art is connected to life and everything else" (CITATION). Kaprow's

lifelike art is sustaining, constructive, and meditative. 9/11, if it is art at all, operates destructively, on the dark side, yeilding what Kant deemed an "outrage on the imagination," a "negative pleasure."

Kant distinguishes the response to the sublime from the response to beauty:

For the beautiful is directly attended with a feeling of the furtherance of life, and is thus compatible with charms and a playful imagination. On the other hand, the feeling of the sublime is a pleasure that only arises indirectly, being brought about by the feeling of a momentary check to the vital forces followed at once by a discharge all the more powerful, and so it is an emotion that seems to be no sport, but dead earnest in the affairs of the imagination. Hence charms are repugnant to it; and, since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e. merits the name of a negative pleasure. [...] An

outrage on the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account ([1790] 1999: 202).¹⁷

"Negative pleasure" and "an outrage on the imagination" was precisely the reaction of many who witnessed in real time or in replay the 9/11 attack on the WTC. But we must go further into this and give an opinion on its relation to art as we have known it, and avantgarde art especially.

Kant discusses the sublime mostly in relation to natural occurrences which in "its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation provided it gives signs of magnitude and power [...] chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime" (203). But Kant is not satisfied. He notes that if something is "great [...] without qualification, absolutely, and in every respect (beyond all comparison) great, that is to say, sublime, we soon perceive that for this it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside itself, but merely in itself. It is a greatness comparable to itself alone. Hence it comes that the sublime is not to be looked for in things of nature, but only in our own ideas (207)." In other words,

¹⁷ All Kant citations from "Critique of Judgement" in *Immanuel Kant Philosophical Writings*, edited by Ernst Behler, 129-246. New York: Continuum.

insofar as the 9/11 attack was a successful assault on the imagination, and they were (I believe), it was sublime.

But isn't it obscene to consider such an event sublime? Can the horrible even as it is unfolding be experienced as art? Long ago, in 1757, Edmund Burke tackled this question in his treatise *On the Sublime and the Beautiful*. I will not discuss this work in detail, but quote only one of Burke's salient, if disturbing, observations:

Choose a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy we have; appoint the most favourite actors; spare no cost upon the scenes and decorations, unite the greatest efforts of poetry, painting, and music; and when you have collected your audience, just at the moment when their minds are erect with expectation, let it be reported that a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed in the adjoining square; in a moment the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts, and proclaim the triumph of the real sympathy. I believe that this notion of our having a simple pain in the reality, yet a delight in the representation, arises from hence, that we do not sufficiently distinguish what we would by no means choose to do, from what we should be eager enough to see if

it was once done. The delight in seeing things, which, so far from doing, our heartiest wishes would be to see redressed.¹⁸

In this vein, Vernon Hyde Minor discusses 9/11, Burke, Kant, and the sublime:

In the realm of the sublime, life and art collapse into one another; fear and danger – so long as our impulse to self-preservation isn't threatened – feed the soul. The sublime causes astonishment, a state in which everything in one's horror-filled mind remains in suspension. The sublime is not formed by reason, although it may anticipate or produce reason. [...] One of the less recognized aspects of the aesthetics of the sublime [...] is the acknowledgement that we are drawn to disasters not because of some perverse pleasure in others' pain, but because we cannot be of a caring disposition unless we find something agreeable in astonishment, something satisfying about the horrible. Or to put it differently, we are quite naturally aesthetized – rather than anesthetized – by horrific events of great historic significance. Then there is that paradoxical and

¹⁸ Vol. 24, part 2, *The Harvard Classics*. Charles W. Eliot, ed. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909-14. Or see www.bartleby.com/24/2.

bewildering experience of the sublime that Kant wrote about. The vast, powerful, terrifying forces unleashed by ill-used human technology overwhelms our cognitive faculties, revealing to us in gut-wrenching terms our inability to grasp, comprehend, or—and this is particularly challenging for an artist—to accomplish anything of such magnitude.¹⁹

“Aesthetized – rather than anesthetized – by horrific events of great historic significance” is a deep insight of the process (many) people undergo in assimilating otherwise hard-to-swallow events. Aesthetization is not the only response to these kind of horrific-yet-fascinating-and-“attractive” events, but it is one strategy. Making art about them – in protest, awe, and sometimes support – is another response. And, of course, political and military action is still another. Far from wanting to eliminate one response in favor of another, I prefer to hold them all in consciousness with regard to the 9/11 attack on the WTC.

But even if the 9/11 attack is art, is it “good” or “bad” from an ethical-moral-political point of view? Most of what we today call “art” carries an ideological or religious message. In the West, before the Renaissance and the advent of capitalism,

¹⁹ Vernon Hyde Minor, “What Kind of Tears? 9/11 and the Sublime.” *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* 14 (2001): 91-96. See <http://www.bilkent.edu.tr/~jast/Number14/Minor.htm>

there was no category of art as such. Notions of "art for art's sake" were not theorized in the West until the 17th and 18th centuries. At present, most art remains bound to forces outside itself and can be not independent or disinterested. Most art is "good" or "bad" in an ethical-moral-political way in terms of values operating beyond or despite the "work itself." To cite two well-known examples of "great bad/evil art" according to today's value system: D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*.²⁰ What is both obvious and troubling is that determining what's good and what's bad is dependent on the beliefs of whomever is making the judgement. In other words, there may be some agreement "universally" about what is art and what is not art; what is sublime and what is not sublime. But there is no universal agreement, nor can I foresee

²⁰ Typical evaluations of these films are: *Birth of a Nation*: "The 1915 film introduced many new conventions that would soon come to define American cinema, while it also drew large numbers of middle-class patrons to moviegoing for the first time. Though the film was a landmark aesthetic work, it was also a spectacle of unfettered racism, with a storyline that would inspire both bigotry and distrust." From the Oxford University Press description of Melvyn Stokes' 2007 *The Birth of a Nation: A History of the Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time*. "*Triumph of the Will* [...] is more than first-class propaganda. It is also a work of art. A work of creative imagination, stylistically and formally innovative, its every detail contributes to its central vision and overall effect. The film is also very, very beautiful." Mary Devereaux, "Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*," 227-56, *Aesthetics and Ethics*, Jerrold Levinson ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 240).

a time when there will be such an agreement, about what is ethically-morally-politically good or bad. As already noted, Osama bin Laden and those in sympathy with Al Qaeda and the jihadist program celebrated when informed of the 9/11 attack.

According to American standards, the 9/11 attack was evil. Thus it is understandable why were Stockhausen's remarks met with outrage. But why did Fo's even more harsh opinion regarding the USA and the victims of 9/11 hardly caused a ripple? Because Fo was not talking about art. He situated 9/11 within the sphere of politics, ideology, and war. Stockhausen placed 9/11 within the art world. And art is not as serious as politics; art is play; art is secondary, a representation. However, from the perspective of performance studies, the attack on the WTC was a "performance": planned, rehearsed, staged, and intended both to wound the USA materially and to affect/infect the imagination. The destruction of two iconic buildings, and the murder of so many people in one fell swoop, was intended to deliver a very specific message about the boldness of the jihad and the vulnerability of the USA.

A performance, surely, but art? I believe that the attack can be understood as the actualization of key ideas and impulses driving the avantgarde. Thierry de Duve writes:

It is as if the history of the avant-gardes were a dialectical history cast off by the contradictions of art and non-art, the history of a prohibition and of its transgression. A slogan could sum it up: it is forbidden to do whatever, let's do it. [...] This is a duty and not a right. [...] What could anyone do once it is mandatory that everything be permitted or, as the rebelling students said in May '68, once it is forbidden to forbid?²¹

Seen this way, the 9/11 attack was in direct succession to futurist, anarchist, and other avantgarde manifestos and actions; destructive as with the Vienna Aktionists; massive as with Christo's and Jeanne-Claude's drapings of buildings and the landscapes.²² To those opposing Al Qaeda, 9/11 was "bad art" in the ethical and moral sense. It was "illegal art" from the point of view of international law because it targeted civilians. But it was a avantgarde art from the point of view of the tradition I am discussing. Is this kind of analysis perverse, not only doing dishonor to the dead and injured but also soiling what art is or ought to be? Does such a designation grant the jihadists

²¹ *Kant After Duchamp*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996: 332-33, 340.

²² See <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/>

much more than they deserve? And does it help us understand better the world we are living in?

Stockhausen was actually envious of the jihadists. "I couldn't do that. By comparison, we composers are nothing." He desired the most extreme place for art. "Artists, too, sometimes try to go beyond the limits of what is feasible and conceivable, so that we wake up, so that we open ourselves to another world." He was claiming an importance for art in the "real world." Not the artlike art that hangs in museums or is heard in concert halls and theatres, but Kaprow's lifelike art. Duve wrote before 9/11, while Frank Lentricchia and Jody McAuliffe wrote after, locating Stockhausen's opinion among a long tradition of artistic fanatics:

The desire beneath many romantic literary visions is for a terrifying awakening that would undo the West's economic and cultural order [...]. As any avant-garde artist might, Stockhausen sees the devotion of high artistic seriousness [...] in the complete commitment of the terrorists [...]. Like terrorists, serious artists are always fanatics; unlike

terrorists, serious artists have not yet achieved the
"greatest" level of art.²³

A single attack has changed world history. What (other) art act has done that? Having just written this, I confess that I am very uncomfortable. I have reasoned my way into a position that I ethically reject.

Maybe my way out is to assert that art requires artists who consciously choose to make art and spectators who willingly observe art. This is the modern humanist tradition - a local idea culturally speaking, bounded by both historical period and geography. The category "art" is not universal. Many objects and performances in Europe that today exist under the aegis of art - are displayed in art museums (themselves a relatively recent phenomenon) -- were not conceived of or made as art. Take, for example, the great cathedrals of the middle ages including their architecture, stained glass windows, altar pieces, chalices and plates, and so on. Surely today these are "priceless works of art." But this estimation is retrospective. The buttresses, vaults, spires, windows, sculptings, paintings, and objects were made for many reasons including use in worship, adherence to

²³ *Crimes of Art + Terror*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003: 100.

church hierarchy, honor to God, Jesus, saints, priests, and patrons. But not "art" as modernists understand the term. Art in the modern sense can only exist where objects and processes can be marked off, framed actually or conceptually, marking objects and processes so that they can be assigned a money value (including that apotheosis of money, "priceless"). This money value does not necessarily replace whatever other functions these objects and processes may have. In brief, art in the modern sense arises alongside the individualism of the Renaissance and the commodity value system of capitalism. But this kind of art is not even today the only kind. Similar to pre-Renaissance churches etc., there are ritual performances, objects, and architectures in all of the world's cultures which are extremely powerful in terms of performance, narrative, structure, color, rhythm, costume, and so on, that require and enforce participation and witnessing - but which are not "art" in the modern sense. From this point of view, 9/11 may be art in a nonmodern sense.

As for art being the product of artists freely choosing to make art, many things we today consider as art are not the products of free will. Or are artists only the planners and overlords and not the workers or victims? For example, the

pyramids of Egypt and Mexico are generally regarded as architectural masterpieces. The Egyptian pyramids were constructed by slaves and the Mexican pyramids were sites of human sacrifice. Time washes away the sweat of slaves and the blood of victims leaving the magnificent (if silent) stones intact receptive to our astonished, admiring gazing. 9/11 is too recent, too drenched in blood and destruction, too much a part of unfinished historical business. We reject the possibility that 9/11 may be art because so many of our own people were killed and wounded; and because our national and cultural psyche was violated. From our humanist perspective the attack was ethically horrific: "innocent people" died. In quotation marks because to the jihadists those who died were not innocent. Their very presence on the planes and in the Trade Towers marked them as participating in hated Western culture. To this way of thinking, there are no "neutrals," no bystanders.

Still, neither Mohammed Atta nor the other hijackers thought of themselves as artists. They would absolutely reject the label "art" in relation to their actions. And most of those who write about 9/11 do not place it in the domain of art. If there is art in 9/11, it is in the reception and aftermath: what Stockhausen imagined when he saw the media representations of

the attack. In the unfolding event, visual artists, performance artists, writers, artists of any kind can "do" just about anything with what happened. There is nothing new in that: Goya and Picasso - not to mention Homer, Aeschylus, Vyasa, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Hemingway, and many more - have made masterpieces from the horrors of war. But all these works are reflective. They came after raw, unmediated events. 9/11 is different because 9/11 was mediated from the outset, and intended to be so - the intention of its authors was not to conquer or occupy territory, or slaughter an army or even as many civilians as possible. 9/11 was a stunning media event, photo op, and real-life show. As such, it exists in both the propagandistic and aesthetic realms - and existed as such while it was happening. This nowness is fundamental. It does not cancel out representations after the fact: the documentaries, dramas, films, writings, first-hand accounts, and memorials, that came later, on September 12 and after. But all of these were supplemental to the attack itself which was already mediatized as it happened. It is this primary event that paradoxically is "9/11 itself" and "9/11 the media event."

What was liminal were the hundreds if not thousands of impromptu "Have You Seen?" notices and photographs posted around

and sometimes far from Ground Zero; or put out on the internet. These were not accounts of what happened; nor were they ongoingly part of the attack. They were "collateral theatre" (parallel to collateral damage in a military operation). Even while the Trade Towers were burning, loved-ones sought information about missing people. The media picked up on these notices which individually were simply pieces of paper, but collectively walls of anxiety and grief. Each notice carried its own hope-against-hopelessness. No one knows exactly how many people found each other through this means. Soon enough, the notices were joined by flowers, a sure sign of condolence. If the 9/11 fireballs and astonishing tidal wave of dust and debris as first the towers collapsed were terrifying, gigantic, and sublime, the walls of notices seeking the missing were pitiful individual atoms of human yearning. These notices collectively were part of the spectacle even as they provided a human-scale entry into experiencing what was happening. People who didn't know anyone in the WTC gazed at the notices as a way of empathizing with those who had lost someone. The walls of "Have you Seen?" tied the enormity of the collective catastrophe to thousands of smaller expressions of individual need.

Lentricchia and McAuliffe do not stop by situating the 9/11 attacks within a tradition of transgressive art. They go on to discuss 9/11 in relation to popular culture – how soon after 9/11 the New York site of the attack became “Groundzeroland,” a “Mecca” (how’s that for irony) for tourists, and a site for nationalist myth making in the Wagnerian tradition. “On December 30, 2001, Mayor [Rudolf] Giuliani opened a viewing platform for the folk over the mystic gulf that is Ground Zero, a stage to which he urged Americans, and everybody, to come and experience ‘all kinds of feelings of sorrow and then tremendous feelings of patriotism.’ [...] The platform’s purpose is to connect tourists to their history at a site that perfectly conjoins terrorism, patriotism, and tourism.”²⁴ By now the platform is gone, but its intention lives on in the work of the Lower Manhattan Development Corporation.

I wish I had a neat conclusion to my ruminations. I don’t. I cannot settle in my own mind the question of whether 9/11 in itself is art or can be more fully understood under the rubric of art. From the morning of 9/11 onward, I’ve been troubled by this question. The terrace of my apartment has a clear view of lower Manhattan. That morning, I was watching television when I

²⁴ Lentricchia and McAuliffe 2003: 103.

heard shouts from workmen constructing an NYU building on La Guardia Place. I went onto my terrace, looked south, and about one mile away I saw the blazing north tower. I thought it was a horrible accident, but wondered how such an accident could happen on a day when the sky was blue and clear. Moments later, I saw a plane flying low make a sharp turn from west to south. "Oh, my!" I said or thought. Something banal and full of shock. Then I saw the plane slice into the south tower as smoothly as a hot knife into butter. Not a sound. A silent movie in full color. A great ball of orange flame and black smoke. It was terrifying; it was sublime; it was horrible; it was beautiful. After that, except for about 45 minutes when my wife and I fetched our daughter from school, I stood on my terrace with some neighbors who had come over because they knew of the view. We watched as the towers came down, etc. What did I do? I offered people something to drink and eat, told them where the bathroom was. From the terrace we watched and talked, amazed, horrified, excited, scared, fascinated. We used binoculars. We saw some people flinging themselves from the towers. I wish I could report that I had only the "correct" reactions - I wish I could write that it so horrified me that I turned away daring not to look or that I was overcome with Aristotle's pity and fear. But it was a lot more complicated than that. I had seen

high wire acts in circuses. I had watched a lot of violence on television. What was happening was all in silence. I couldn't stop what was happening. I was not personally responsible for it. So in my own way I witnessed it in more of a spectatorial than a "this terrible thing is happening to me" kind of way. I cannot speak for my neighbors - professors and good people all - except to note that our conversation indicated that their response at this point in the unfolding story was akin to mine. People walked back and forth between the terrace and the television room. There was sympathy and anxiety, but nothing approaching a full-blown "pity and fear" tragic catharsis. That reaction, for me, came later, when I recollected the events and played them over in the theatre of my mind's eye. When new people arrived, they brought rumors and information. We took in what passed for analysis by media pundits. But most importantly, everyone was very aware that from the terrace looking south we were watching was the thing itself. What we saw heard on TV were explanations and rationalizations both describing and shaping reactions, reporting events and instructing how "we" the receivers were to react. The coverage and talking heads gave us both a wider horizon with which to comprehend what we were witnessing and closeups of events at and near ground zero. As I watched both in person and on television, I knew that whatever

else it was, I was experiencing a spectacle, a "live movie," "real history happening," etc. Being the academic that I am, I referenced Debord's "society of the spectacle."²⁵ And I knew that the jihadists intended it to be thus. 9/11 was no stealth attack, noticed only by its devastating effects, like anthrax through the mail or poison in the water. It was a "show" and a "showing." And I, and my neighbors, were among its designated intended spectators - as were supporters of the jihad. Globally speaking, we were a divided audience.

I am exploring these possibilities not to validate terrorist actions or insult the memory of the dead and wounded, but to point out that terrorism, at the scale of 9/11, works like art more on states of mind and feeling than on physical destruction. Or, if you will, the destruction is the means toward the end of creating terror, which is a state of mind. 9/11 is an example of what Burke and Kant called the sublime, arousing in spectators the Aristotelian tragic emotions of pity and fear. Or at least from the Western side. Al Qaeda and its adherents saw in the attack the very wrath of God. Look at in these ways - as event, shock, avantgarde art, tragedy, and/or

²⁵ See Rene Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. London and New York: Verso, 1990. Originally published in French 1967.

vengeance - 9/11 performs Artaud's uncanny assertion from his 1938 essay "No More Masterpieces": "We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theatre has been created to teach us that first of all."